

Old pals share organic taste of Europe

By Susan Goracke of the Daily Courier

ROGUE RIVER - It began as a high school friendship in Cave Junction and grew into a worldwide import business with offices in Spain, Dubai, Japan and its U.S. headquarters: Rogue River.

Edward Field and Richard Wright - both 1986 Illinois Valley High School graduates and members of the school's business club - kept in touch after they headed off to college.

Field earned a bachelor's degree in business management from Southern Oregon University and Wright's degree is in marketing with a minor in international marketing from the same school.

But their careers took different directions.

Wright went into the trucking industry and ended up starting Eagle Transportation, a freight brokerage business headquartered in Rogue River in 1999 with partner Tom Thompson.

Meanwhile, Field had worked his way up to manager of Shop Smart grocery store in Cave Junction. On a European vacation in the early 1990s, he met Pilar Merono in Madrid.

A former Spanish national tennis champion, Merono had earned an MBA degree from the Madrid Business School after graduating with a bachelor's degree in management information systems from Syracuse University in New York.

The two hit it off, she moved to Southern Oregon and began working as international business manager and marketer for Medford-based Bear Creek Corp., and they were married in 1994.

About that time, the U.S. organic foods market was heating up, and Field both noticed and promoted the trend within his own company, Brookings-based C&K Market, which also owns Ray's Food Place stores.

"In 1999, we spotted an incredible opportunity to relocate to Pilar's native Spain to begin focusing on this (organic) trend (with) U.S. food consumers," Field says.

The couple moved to Cartagena on Spain's southeast Mediterranean coast, where they consulted for the Spanish national and regional governments on several projects exporting organic foods around the world.

After establishing contacts with organic growers throughout Southern Europe, Field and Merono saw a business opportunity, and Field thought of his old friend Wright.

"Rich and I grew up together out in the Illinois Valley and always joked around about starting a business together one day in the future," he says. "It was only natural that Pilar and I approached Rich to look into establishing an import company that matched our grower sources and retail contacts in the states with his logistics and compliance expertise."

In 2000, the three pooled their expertise to form Natural Merchants, distributing fine organic and natural wines and foods such as balsamic vinegar and olive oil from European countries surrounding the Mediterranean Sea to markets in the United States and other countries.

They called their company Natural Merchants as a "double play on words," Field explains. "We are merchants, of course, of natural and organic products. At the same time, we three feel like we are merchants naturally - something in the blood."



KEVIN LAUNIUS/Daily Courier
 Richard Wright, operation manager with Natural Merchants in Rogue River, shows off some of the imported wines that will ship to a distributor in California.

Field is the company's sales director, providing his knowledge of and contacts in the U.S. food industry. He negotiates with companies in the different levels of distribution channels.

As marketing director, Merono contributes experience in sales and promotion, organizing trade shows and the creation of business collaborations.

Wright's experience includes developing contracts, dispatch systems, just-in-time systems, building territorial client bases through recruitment, negotiating disputes, handling freight claims and the responsibilities of risk management.

He is the company's operations manager.

Due to liquor control laws in most states, Natural Merchants can import wines into the country, but not sell them directly to retailers, Wright says. Sales of alcohol products must go through a domestic distributor, which in the case of Southern Oregon is Mountain People's Warehouse in Grass Valley, Calif. - the corporate headquarters of the Western division of United Natural Foods.

Customers can find organic wines imported by Natural Merchants at Ray's Food Place and Gooseberries in Grants Pass and at Taylor Sausage Country Store in Cave Junction.

Most popular are the Vertvs (pronounced "ver-TUSE") label wines from Bodegas Iranzo vineyards in Spain, Wright reports.

Both Wright and Field still maintain close ties with the Illinois Valley, where their mothers live. Wright's mother is Jackie Wright, and Field's mom is Kathleen Kennedy.

"The Illinois Valley is a wonderful place to grow up," Field says and points to IVHS's small-school atmosphere for promoting acceptance of diversity and friendship.


"We were very much encouraged to pursue our entrepreneurial aspirations in the late '80s with projects coordinated by our ... marketing teacher and DECA Club administrator Emma Smith," Field notes. "We owe a lot to her."

For more information, go to www.naturalmerchants.com.

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